DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 051 RC 021 380

AUTHOR Bronson, Jim; Schaub, Nancy
TITLE Poetry as a Healing Experience for Teams.
PUB DATE 1996-09-00
NOTE 7p.; In: Spawning New Ideas: A Cycle of Discovery; see RC 021 376.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Corporate Education; Creative Writing; *Emotional Development; *Experiential Learning; *Group Dynamics; Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; *Poetry; *Team Training; Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS *Facilitators

ABSTRACT

Experiential practitioners have the opportunity to help groups move to a higher level of functioning, getting beyond unresolved emotional issues and becoming more truthful, immediate, involved, and collaborative. This critical process takes place along a continuum from "staying safe and shallow" at one end to "going deep and real" at the other. While outdoor experiential processes are a powerful means to help work teams through this shift, poetry can be an effective, inexpensive way to accomplish similar objectives. Key success factors of team development include team members interacting in a new way, using their hearts as well as their heads; staying focused on each other and relationships, as well as on tasks; envisioning new possibilities; communicating about real issues; and respecting each other. Several examples of useful poetry readings are offered. In addition to reading and listening to poetry, team members may create and share their own poems. Composing even very short poems can move participants into a new frame of mind, into speaking of things and feelings that they care about and have energy around. Working in small groups facilitates interaction among team members, while reading their favorites to each other prepares the way for team members to discuss success factors that will help them to their next level of development. Some pitfalls of "going deep and being real" are discussed, and 13 core competencies of facilitators are listed. (SV)

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POETRY AS A HEALING EXPERIENCE FOR TEAMS

Jim Bronson and **Nancy Schaub**
Consultants, The Challenge Learning Center, 201 San Antonio Circle Suite 208, Mountain View, CA 94040
USA phone: (415) 949-2011

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Abstract
Spawning new ideas and new ways of being together happens best in a clear, trusting environment where relationships are working, and left over emotional issues are surfaced and handled. The evocative, creative power of poetry is an effective tool for moving groups toward this effective way of interacting.

Poetry can bring together those parts of us which exist in dread,
and those which have the surviving sense of a possible
happiness, collectivity, community, a loss of isolation.
– Adrienne Rich

Based on our conversations with other experiential practitioners and on our own experience in developing work teams, there is a critical process that may occur which turns out to be very healing for the team. Usually it is accompanied by much energy and fun and it may be the team's most remembered part of our working with them. This critical process takes place along a continuum with **Staying "Safe" and Shallow** on one end and **Going Deep, Immediate and Real** on the other. As we are able to move the team toward the deep end, the level of involvement and participation increases. In Henry Miller's words, team members are more willing and able to "give themselves -- recklessly, abundantly, completely." There are great dividends for the organization in increased creativity, energy, commitment, satisfaction and retention of team members.

How can we facilitate the movement from shallow to deep? What are the pitfalls in working with teams where team members are encouraged to go deep, immediate and real? What are the core competencies of facilitators who can move teams successfully into and through the deep end? Let's take these one at a time.

How Can We Facilitate the Movement From Shallow to Deep?
Many authors have shown that outdoor experiential processes are a powerful means for team members to get real and immediate with each other, to gain energy and to increase their effectiveness in collaborative problem solving. We have found that poetry is an effective way to accomplish similar objectives. Which approach is appropriate depends on the team, their budget, their willingness to take on physical challenges, etc.

In our experience, there are some key success factors that helped teams handle their unresolved emotions and develop a more collaborative approach to problem solving.

Key Team Development Success Factors

Team members:

- interact in a new way (use their hearts as well as heads)
- stay focused on each other and relationships, as well as tasks
- envision new possibilities
- communicate together about real issues
- respect each other.

When you don't have the option of using outdoor experiential processes, what can you do to help a team improve their team development success factors? Another Emily Dickinson poem, offered in the right setting, may facilitate getting the process started.

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Much Madness is divinest Sense --
To a discerning Eye --
Much Sense -- the starkest Madness --
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail --
Assent -- and you are sane --
Demur -- you're straightway dangerous --
And handled with a Chain --

Team members who have felt unable to speak up and suggest improvements will identify with the person who demurs and is handled with a chain. Rilke's "First Elegy" speaks of this difficult choice: to speak out and say what is really happening , or demur and continue enduring the "terror".

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'
hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed
in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

Another way to energize the team and get some movement toward speaking up and developing their success factors may be through using Kabir's "To Be a Slave on Intensity." In part, Kabir's poem says:

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!

Plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,
Believe in the Great Sound!

Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for, it is
the intensity of the longing for the Guest that does all the
work.
Look at me and you will see a slave of that intensity.

When these writings work, they help people move to a new way of seeing and being together. Why? James Dickey suggests that, through poetry, we connect with other imaginations. Dickey, who is a National Book Award-winning poet, says:

The first thing to understand about poetry is that it comes to
you from outside you, in books or in words, but that for it to
live, something from within you must come to it and meet it
and complete it. Your response with your own mind and body
and memory and emotions gives the poem its ability to work
its magic; if you give to it, it will give to you, and give plenty.

In addition to reading poetry to teams, a very effective use of poetry is to help team members create their own poems. When they share their poems they are trusting and reaching out to each other just as surely as if they are doing a trust fall or rafting a rapids. Composing even short "mini poems" has the effect of moving participants into a new frame of mind, actually into their hearts, into speaking of things and feelings that they care about and have energy around.

As to where to start in helping teams develop their own poems, why not start with the sun? "Start with the sun," D.H. Lawrence said, "and everything will slowly, slowly happen." Up front, it is important to

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adjust expectations by affirming that simple, honest expressions are just what is required. For an example, you may refer to Mark Van Doren who wrote:

> Horses, I mean; butterflies, whales;
> Mosses, and stars; and gravelly
> Rivers, and fruit.
>
> Oceans, I mean; black valleys; corn;
> Brambles, and cliffs; rock, dirt, dust, ice ...

Form is not important. Prose and poetry may be intermixed - whatever comes most easily. Rhymes are not important. Participants should focus on 1) choosing a subject they enjoy; 2) being as honest as possible; and 3) using concrete imagery: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, feelings. Put the emphasis on "heart" over craft. Simplicity has both beauty and power, for instance, the poem by Basho:

> Old pond,
> frog jumps in -
> splash.

Participants can be invited (as Gary Snyder puts it) "to meet that blundering, clumsy, beautiful, shy world of poetic, archetypal, wild intuition that's not going to come out into the broad daylight of rational mind but wants to peek in." Working in small groups facilitates interaction among team members. Finishing with small groups reading favorites to each other prepares the way for team members to discuss the success factors that will help them get to their next level of development.

What are the Pitfalls for Teams Where Members are Encouraged to Go Deep and Be Real?
Team members may expect too much of their newly developed process skills. For instance, they may think that their ground rules will always work and be bulletproof, and then be disappointed when they hit a rough spot they don't handle well. At the end of an intervention with a team, after completing two days of a retreat and feeling great about their new skills, one team member voiced some concerns that others may not follow through on their commitments when they return to work. The concerns were expressed in a somber tone which sounded cynical to most. The mood in the room went from optimism, "we can do it," to pessimism, "we'll fail just like we always have." As one team member said, "Here we go down that same old rat hole."

Even though it was hard to take the time at that late stage of the retreat, we had the team divide into small working units and brainstorm how to deal with making sure team members follow through with commitments and, just as importantly, how to deal with comments that are expressed with what may be seen as cynicism and bring down the team's energy level. Each working unit reported back to the large group.

The team agreed on ways to ensure follow-up. They also shared what it felt like to have ideas, even potentially excellent ideas, expressed in a somber, cynical way. This was a valuable lesson in how sensitive team members are to each other and how important it is to ask for clarification when a person's statements seem to contain an implied, heavy emotional content. Team members agreed that checking it out with phrases like, "Let me see, do I understand you to say _____," may avoid the rat hole problem. The team had managed a situation with unresolved emotions and felt powerful and upbeat as the retreat concluded.

Some other pitfalls include:

- the process is getting too deep too fast (periodic check-ins may avoid this, "Is anyone feeling uncomfortable with our process so far?"

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- the team may not respect the facilitator enough to take them on the journey to the deep end (a good point here is to remember, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." You must build credibility right from the start by sharing who you are and what you value, as it relates to working with the team.)
- going deeper may be seen by some as being irrelevant to the work of the team (deepening the level of interaction must be done in the context of helping team members work more effectively on the business of the team).

What are the core competencies of facilitators who can move teams successfully into and through the deep end?

One of the great poems of the twentieth century is Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." One stanza is:

> When the blackbird flew out of sight,
> It marked the edge
> of one of many circles.

Following on this theme, here are thirteen ways of looking at the core competencies of facilitators who can move teams deeply successfully (these are adapted from Gail Shafarman, Ph.D., a Bay Area OD Practitioner and Therapist, "Thirteen ways of Looking At How a Poet and a Therapist Are One").

Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Core Competencies

1) The ability to sustain attention.
2) The power to use language and the silences that surround language as a medium of change.
3) The vision to perceive the possibility of transformation that rests within the next moment.
4) Experience with subtle transitions that guide individuals and teams toward skillful beginnings and appropriate endings.
5) The development of a skilled intelligence that can shape what is emerging into a communicable form.
6) The ability to speak, act, and witness truth with compassion.
7) An appreciation of the power of pacing, time, and rhythm in choreographing change.
8) A respect for the capacity of people to transmute suffering into wisdom.
9) A regard for vision and values and an ability to articulate them.
10) Skills that inspire humor, growth, and play.
11) A recognition of the beauty of form -- and the need to judiciously break forms.
12) A recognition of the beauty of relationships and the ability to keep them developing through high stress periods
13) A sense of the mystery that exists within the ordinary acts of everyday work and life.

Conclusion:

As experiential practitioners we have the opportunity to use powerful tools in helping groups move to a higher level of functioning, getting beyond unresolved emotional issues and becoming more truthful, immediate, involved and collaborative. Language and poetry offer some interesting possibilities which we have sketched in above, both in reading poetry to the group and in having group members compose poems of their own. Groups that are developing successfully will use the power of poetry to have fun, become more open to each other, increase their energy and move toward more interdependent ways of solving their problems together.

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The poet Hayden Carruth talks about the honesty and intensity that come from poetry and then goes on to say, "Every poet I have known has also been a more fully functioning person for having given part of themselves to poetry. It is clearly important to them to be as full a person as possible. Their writing is an extension of that conviction."

It is our belief that our work in helping groups of people develop is also an extension of that same conviction. This conviction is part of what makes the group change process so interesting and fulfilling, both for practitioners and for group members.

Goethe's poem "The Longing" has a lot to say about the change process and about the strong motivation that underlies the movement toward becoming more effective. Here is part of this marvelous poem.

> Distance does not make you falter,
> now, arriving in magic, flying,
> and finally, insane for the light,
> you are the butterfly and you are gone.
>
> And so long as you haven't experienced
> this: to change and so to grow,
> you are only a troubled guest
> on the dark earth.

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